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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the marginalization of the early years of schooling in Australian national gender reform programs. Focusing on an action research project that addressed gender issues in preschool through grade three classes, the paper outlines the issues that teachers faced, the theoretical framework that they used, and the strategies that they employed in having children understand gender relations. The paper describes how teachers worked with children to deconstruct asymmetrical relations of power that were lived out between girls and boys at school. The paper also discusses the teachers' successful employment of a model of critical deconstruction with children in the first years of school. The paper centers on the ways in which young children establish a politics of gender that is largely reflective of what they know operates in the world beyond themselves. (AMC)

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Reality Bites! Sweet Innocents and Gender.

Keynote Address. *Changing Realities- Changing Practices*

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Abstract
This paper investigates the marginalisation of the early years of schooling in national gender reform programs. It highlights one of the few nationally funded projects that focussed on teachers' action research on gender issues in preschool through to grade three classes. The paper outlines the issues that teachers faced, the theoretical framework that they used, and the strategies that they employed in having children understand gender relations. Teachers worked with children to deconstruct asymmetrical relations of power that were lived out between girls and boys at school. The project marks teachers successful employment of a model of critical deconstruction with children in the first years of school.

Reality Bites! Sweet Innocents and Gender.

This conference is about "Changing Realities- Changing Practices". One of the realities that overshadows the early years of school is the lack of attention to the ways that young girls and boys assume and accommodate inequitable gender relations. To date, vested national interest has focussed on exploring gender in relation to upper levels of schooling, to academic subject choice, to tertiary entrance into particular faculties, to career opportunities, and to glass ceilings on women's uptake in the labour market.

At the national level, the educational focus is on how we can dismantle the highly gendered contexts in which we live, how we can encourage girls and boys to refuse restrictive and coercive gender identities and relations. However, for a variety of reasons that I will touch on briefly in this paper, the early years of school have been largely ignored in evolving dialogues about gender. I argue that any educational process that aims at radical reinterpretations of what we want to be and to achieve as a community must begin in early childhood (See Alloway, 1995). To forget about the 'under eights' is a serious misreading of the gendered realities of young children's lives. Eight's simply too late for teachers to start thinking about gender reform.

This paper begins by exploring the marginalisation of gender research in the early years of school. It then centres on the ways in which young children establish a politics of gender that is largely reflective of what they know operates in the world beyond themselves. The paper attempts to open out the ways that girls and boys accomplish their gender through everyday interactions at school. In doing so, the discussion draws on a Gender Equity in Curriculum Reform project that engaged teachers from preschool through to grade three in action research. The ways that teachers worked at changing practices and refashioning gender relations in their classes are also briefly outlined. Most notably, the project moved beyond equal opportunity, anti-sexist and anti-bias curriculum models to a model of reform based on critical deconstruction. In order to make possible more equitable and emancipatory relations between girls and boys, teachers worked together with children in critically **de**constructing and **re**constructing gender relations as lived out in their classrooms and centres. Each of these points is elaborated in the following sections.

Gender Reform and the Marginalisation of the Early Years of School

With respect to taking up issues like gender, teachers of young children are subject to problems from within their field as well as from outside of the field. The very child-centred discourse that directs teaching in the early years can obscure the ways that gender is made relevant in children's lives. Children can be seen as too young, too innocent, too politically and interpersonally naive to warrant teacher comment on their gender relations. At the same time, those outside the field have little appreciation of the profound contribution that teachers in the early years could make to the national gender reform program.

Discourses from within: positioning the child as politically innocent
The dominant philosophy, pedagogy and theory of knowledge that inform the first years of education involve:

- commitment to the child's 'natural' development
- promotion of the child as an autonomous learner who can be trusted to choose freely in a wide range of situations
- belief in the child's ability to construct its own knowledge of itself and of the world
- teacher determination to foreground the child in the learning process and to background the teacher-facilitator
- positioning the child as politically naive.

Briefly, child centred discourse is firmly based on a psychology of individual difference that too easily suggests that identity is an expression of the inner self. The discourse obscures the extent to which young children take up their identities within the social parameters available to them rather than merely unfolding in some inner-driven way. The psychological discourse overlooks the broader issues of the ways that gender is socially constructed and fails to conceptualise gender as relations of power.

Furthermore, when children are understood to be piecing together intimately meaningful knowledge, including knowledge of themselves, teachers find it difficult to see why, or under what circumstances, they might intervene. Autonomous children are understood to take charge of their own learning: Good teacher-facilitators are hesitant to interrupt the flow of learning for fear of imposing their adult perspectives on children. What is not obvious within the discourse is the way that children must inevitably draw from their limited experiences of what it means to live and to relate as an embodied female or male.

Where the child is also understood to be politically innocent, to be too young to engage in interpersonal politics, social justice issues seem irrelevant to their learning. Young innocent children are seen to be developing "naturally". Within this logic, issues of social justice remain the rightful preserve of older children in higher grades who presumably lose their innocence sometime after the early childhood years. Behaviours that might be identified in older children as sexist, racist, classist or sexually harassing are dismissed in these early contexts as mere kids' stuff. The kids are presumably too young to understand and certainly too young to discuss the politics of their gendered relations. Where teachers do intervene, it is often to right an obvious wrong, to establish harmonious classroom relations, rather than to challenge the very power structures that give life to the behaviour in the first instance.

Discourses from without: a public image problem

From outside the field, there are a number of (mis)understandings about early education that have militated against its serious consideration in national reform agendas. To begin with, the possibilities for radical reform become quite slippery when faced with an iconography of young children, cared for and educated by a "mother-made-conscious"(Steedman, 1988), by "nice ladies who love children" (Stonehouse, 1988). After all, who would dare to contest the labours of nice ladies, professionally embodied mothers, who know and care so much about young children, their needs, their desires, their "whole" development.

While these nice ladies are affirmed for caring about children, their relative standing as a professional body is poor. Given a clientele of children form birth to eight years of age, the work that early educators do is considered at worst, to be merely custodial, at best, to be trivial in terms of educational demands, and certainly to be apolitical. In face of such public misrepresentations, the profound work that teachers in the early years can do to transform gender relations is readily obscured from view.

Public reckoning and accountability indicators

With economic rationalism currently driving educational decision making, the weight of accountability for equity is located in the senior secondary years- that is, at the most visible point of public reckoning. Accordingly, much of the debate about gender bogs down in the production of statistical indicators such as who's doing better than whom in advanced mathematics? Who has the edge in literacy? Who is entering the engineering, medicine and law faculties at university? And so the debate dissolves into what Eva Cox identifies as the "competing victims syndrome" (Cox, 1995). Everyone wants priority victim status to compete for scarce educational dollars and resources.

While much thinking about gender equity has been directed at the upper levels of schooling, the early years have been severely marginalised. National preoccupation with gender as it relates to high school retention rates, subject-specific attainment, tertiary entrance scores and post-school options has invisibilised the highly gendered worlds of home, nurseries, child care centres, kindergartens, preschools and the early years of compulsory schooling. National gender reform programs have offered few clues as to how young children learn to do their gender, to get their gender right, and to often resist adult efforts at achieving more gender equitable outcomes from the processes of schooling. Teachers of young children are given no idea of how they might be implicated in the production and maintenance of inequities that cause such concern in the upper grades and in later life.

In view of the lack of substantial reference to the early years in national debate, parents and educators might be excused for thinking that early childhood centres represent gender free zones; that the dominant pedagogies guarantee opportunities for individual children to bloom in genderless (kinder)gardens and classrooms. Somehow, young children's identities are (mis)understood as developing 'naturally', free from the social constraints that are recognised to operate in the lives of older

children and adults. When the early years of life are ignored, the implicit message seems to be that gender issues don't emerge, or don't matter, at least until the upper grades of primary schooling.

In brief, gender is left largely unchallenged at the early levels of education. Paradoxically, it is in the early years that young girls and boys begin to learn about gender appropriate ways of behaving and relating, academic areas of interest and of achievements, contextually determined relations of power, and patterns of desire. Moreover, as evidenced in the following section, recent research suggests that early childhood contexts often represent highly gendered environments.

A Gender Equity in Curriculum Reform Project

An action research study, *Addressing the Construction of Gender at the Preschool to Year 3 Level of Schooling.*, was funded by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) under the national Gender Equity in Curriculum Reform project (See Alloway, 1995). Relatively few studies that focus on the early years of schooling have been able to connect into national gender reform or to feed back into national policy making. This project offered the opportunity to move beyond equal opportunity, anti-sexist and anti-bias approaches and to embrace a model of critical deconstruction that was being investigated at higher levels of schooling.

Teachers who volunteered for the project initially expressed vague concerns about gender relations in their classes but claimed that prior to the project they had little support or in-servicing to identify what was happening. In moving beyond previous reform models, those involved in the project were required to grapple with critical concepts drawn from poststructuralist theory (See Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1993). The theory led them firstly to look at the discourses and practices that informed their relations with girls and boys in their classes; and then to help the children identify the discursive and social practices that regulated gender relations amongst themselves. One of the first challenges for teachers in this project was to recognise emerging power relations between girls and boys and to question their own taken-for-granted interpretations of interactions between girls and boys as 'natural', 'innocent', apolitical play. Clearly, changing realities is only possible when the focus for change is identified.

Denaturalising the taken-for-granted

As teachers began on their action research in their classes/ centres, they attempted to articulate their concerns. The commonality of their concerns crystallised as they had the opportunity to meet together across State borders and begin a collaborative research process. In referencing their work, rather than dwell on individual studies, I have tried to distil the findings in the following themes:

Aggressive and harassing behaviours Perhaps the most persistent concern that teachers shared at in-service sessions was of boys' aggressive and harassing behaviours that were, for the most part, directed at the girls. Teachers from a number of sites documented compelling evidence of the ways that some boys used

aggression and violence to achieve their own ends. Teachers recorded numerous instances like the following:

.three preschool boys throwing things at four girls on the jungle gym, presumably so they could gain access to the equipment, to the point where the girls cowered and shouted for help.

.four preschool boys coercing a girl's retreat from the sandpit by throwing blocks at her as she attempted to move toward the centre of play.

.a grade one boy balling his fist and threatening to punch a girl when she refused to hand over her book to him.

.a preschool boy adopting threatening body pose in home play and positioning his co-player as incompetent through his verbal assault: "I'm tired of your stupidity woman. Can't you EVER do anything right".

.a year one boy tripping, kicking and laughing at a visually impaired girl as she fell to the floor.

Young boys were also seen sexually harassing girls. There were several reports of boys looking up girls skirts and of girls not knowing appropriate self-protecting strategies, verbal retorts or grievance procedures. Such behaviours clearly constituted sex-based harassment by boys of girls rather than general misconduct of one child against another. Girls did not attempt to look up boys' shorts, neither did boys attempt to look up other boys' clothing. One grade three boy confessed to the girls' charge of "perving" on them but responded incredulously to the proposition that he might try his behaviour on other boys.

Exclusionary and monopolistic practices Both girls and boys were seen to exert power in monopolising particular activities by reflecting a socially endorsed gender order. Children were observed excluding one another from activities through legitimating claims of gender-ownership. For example:
.a girl was able to retrieve a doll from a boy in home corner through her claim: "Give me the doll. Fathers have to go to work."

.a boy was disallowed access to the play oven by a girl's directive: "Don't touch that. That's a mother oven".

.a boy pushed a girl away from a "boys' table" that was laden with construction materials.

.boys attempted to exclude girls from "boys" sporting activities.

While attempts at monopoly and exclusion were sometimes contested by children, girls and boys generally understood the gendered nature of particular activities and the need for concerted resistance if they were to be permitted a turn.

Gendered Use of Playground Space While some teachers began to document the gendered use of playground space, it seemed that the children themselves were already aware of the playing and recreational spaces that were available to them on the basis of their gender. Grade two children in one site drew maps that showed that boys monopolised up to ninety per cent of the playing fields. According to their teachers, while boys spread out over the grassy ovals, girls were often relegated to the hot concrete surrounds or sought shelter under the shade of a tree. Girls accommodated their allotment to the borders of the fields by taking up less space-demanding activities like elastics and hand ball games.

Sex segregated activities In some school sites, teachers spoke of the unwillingness of girls and boys to cooperate or to play with one another. Girls and boys resorted to separatist groupings whenever they were allowed an option. Children's choices of activity groups, cooperative learning partnerships, and sports teams were sex-segregated and reflected a gender apartheid that was often acknowledged and articulated by the children. As alluded to in the following conversation, girls and boys understood themselves to be essentially different and to exist in a conflict of interests:

Teacher: Could the girls play with the boys on the oval at lunchtime?
Boy: No, our games are too rough.
Teacher: Would you change them so that the girls could join in?
Boy: I suppose so. But it wouldn't be so good.
Girl: The boys tackle too hard and hit the ball too hard. It hurts.

In such instances, girls and boys recognised that the ways in which they experienced themselves in relation to physical aggression were in conflict. For the boys, to accommodate the girls would mean a reduction of the virility of the game as they understood it. For the girls, participation would mean accepting that their bodies, as well as the ball, would be the target of play. In terms of the ways that most of the children understood themselves as masculine or feminine, the compromises necessary for cross-sex play of this kind must have outweighed the promised pleasures of playing together.

According to one teacher's report, the only way that the boys and girls in her class came together was through games on the oval of "catch and kiss". Even then, while some girls and boys attempted to enact a romantic storyline of togetherness, the

most predictable denouement was one of separation, with the boys eventually physically attacking the girls, leaving the girls crying.

World of work At a rural school, teachers reported that most children in their classes assumed highly gendered understandings of the work opportunities available to them. Even where children's mothers worked alongside their fathers as farmers, the evidence could be dismissed in favour of more traditional, patriarchal interpretations of men's and women's relations to one another. As one girl enlightened her class:

Dad and mum are farmers. Well, only Dad is really. Mum helps him. [Girl in 1/2 composite]

A boy in the same class helped unravel the apparent error in the teacher's question about a female doctor:

Teacher: If you went to the doctor what would she do if you were not feeling well?

Boy: He, um, she would fix me up and then she would (hesitated -looking confused) she would look after me and I could stay until I got better 'cause she might be a nurse!

Teachers deliberately attempted to disrupt gendered understandings of the world of work through visual presentations and discussions that focussed on women and men in non-traditional occupations. The extent to which these children had interpellated hegemonic images of gender appropriate work was reflected in their intellectual struggles to maintain a more widely accepted, socially legitimated gender order. Of the photo of "Ellen the Farmer", one seven year old girl wrote:
Ellen lives on a farm. She is a farmer and she is giving the sheep some food and drink. I don't think Ellen has a husband. If she did he would probably be doing the farming.

A seven year old boy wrote of "Ross the Kindergarten Teacher":

Ross teaches kindergarten. In a couple of years he is going to teach grade seven.

In this rural community, children in the early grades already understood their lives and work opportunities to be restricted by gender.

Gendered readings and writings In some case studies, teachers noted how girls and boys in their classes employed gendered discourses in

discussing traditional fairy tales, in resisting feminist retellings of such tales, and in developing their own written stories.

For instance, in class discussions of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, girls' talk focussed on romance, love and the ultimate uniting of Snow White and her Prince through marriage. Boys' talk revolved around the heroism of the Prince, his riding ability, and the violence that the boys themselves would like to do to the villainous Queen. As for *Princess Smartypants*, both girls and boys voiced their resistance to the textual appearance of an independent princess who refused to live out her life in relation to a man. While a group of girls suggested that Smartypants needed "to settle down", some boys threatened to take an axe to Smartypants for turning her unwanted suitor into a toad. Such findings are consistent with Bronwyn Davies' (1989) work with preschoolers.

Gendered discourses in children's writings were also a concern. Teachers noted how many girls and boys from grade one wrote themselves differently into their emergent stories. While boys wrote themselves into their plots as central and agentic and heroic, girls often attributed action to characters other than themselves as they adopted the position of narrator. Pam Gilbert (1989) noted similar trends in girls' and boys' writing in the middle primary years.

In summary, teachers' participation in this study was vital in highlighting the highly gendered experiences of young girls and boys. According to the teachers, children as young as four were already immersed in the politics of gender. Importantly, the research draws attention to the multiple ways in which young girls and boys are themselves implicated in the construction of gender. As indicated in the following section, teachers actively attempted to dismantle restrictive and inequitable gender relations that operated amongst the children. The critical insight was to see how children had already begun to regulate themselves and one another in terms of how best they might know and do their gender. In so many ways, the children appeared intent on displaying their gender as a social accomplishment.

Changing Realities

As teachers worked together in the project, asymmetries in power relations between girls and boys became more visible to them, more easily spoken about. As they collected information and collaborated with one another, they began to see more clearly the ways that asymmetries in gender relations were practised and legitimised in educational settings, *under their supervision*. By participating in the research, teachers claimed to be more aware of the ways in which such inequitable power relations had either been produced or allowed to flourish in their classrooms. In order to adopt more emancipatory pedagogies, the tasks became:

to disrupt the discourses and practices that maintained inequitable

gender relations; and ultimately,

- to have children recognise how they could use alternative discourses to refuse restrictive understandings of themselves as gendered beings.

As the action research moved toward reform, teachers employed a variety of strategies to denaturalise asymmetrical gender relations identified in their classrooms. For instance, with respect to aggressive and harassing behaviours, some teachers offered children immediate role plays of oppressive gender relations that emerged within their groups. Given the visual cues of a simulated action replay, children as young as four were encouraged to discuss what was happening in terms of the gender relations that generated between them.

To help children understand how girls and boys often monopolised activities on the basis of gender, some teachers used the video *Who Wants to Be a Princess Anyway* (Curriculum Development Centre, 1987). The video, which is more usually reserved for teacher professional development, offered the children a basis for whole group discussion about gender relations. Subsequent to this activity, at one school site, grade three children moved to a critique of gender relations based on a video of their own interactions in their class. This group of children also engaged in puppet plays, presentations to the whole school assembly, and their own action research on gender relations that operated in the school.

Other teachers made gender relations a topic for classroom discussion and challenge by having their classes map girls' and boys' use of the playing fields; by having children track their participation in sporting activities on a class graph; or by introducing new games that were not gender identified and thereby offered the possibility of being actively constructed as gender neutral play. Still others persisted in challenging gender relations by presenting children with non-sexist and feminist stories and by contesting the ways in which children wrote themselves into stories in gender limited ways.

While some children resisted attempts to alter the status quo, for the most part, teachers reported impressive moves in children's understandings of how they were constituted through gender. In one site where teachers worked with girls and boys to deconstruct entrenched sex-segregated groupings, the children themselves expressed their enthusiasm for the new possibilities that opened to them. As affirmation of the success of such projects, children were reported to say:

People aren't saying "You love so and so"! Kids are friendlier to each other (Grade 3 boy).

Kids are picking both boys and girls on teams. Boys aren't saying "Ooh! I'm not sitting next to a girl (Grade 3 girl)

The tone of children's responses was characterised by a grade two girl's

comment:
Things are changing because were talking about it.

The efforts of these teachers in researching gender and in changing gender relations bear testimony to the work on gender politics that can be done with young children.

Conclusions

It is important to note that this project moved beyond equal opportunity, anti-sexist and anti-bias curricula that have been employed in educational contexts over the past decades. The project was not merely about girls and boys learning to be nicer to one another, about more affable relations in the classroom, or about improved sharing. Neither was it about what Giroux (1986) refers to as a 'facile egalitarianism' that promotes harmony and respect for difference, but offers no fundamental disruption to the established order. Rather, the project operated within a framework of critical deconstruction that poses fundamental challenges to the power relations that hold gender relations in place. The aim of the project was that teachers, together with children, interrogate the ways they had come to know themselves and to relate as gendered beings; to unsettle and to shift taken-for-granted understandings of gender as asymmetrical relations of power. The challenge was for the teachers and the children to see that their gendered identities and relations could be done otherwise.

In practical terms, in moving towards reform, teachers engaged the children in discussions and activities that directly targeted children's understandings of gender as a social construct. It seems that even at preschool level, it was possible for children to enter a dialogue with teachers about how inequitable relations of power were established between girls and boys.

Teachers in these early years are often hesitant to contest established social orders for fear of politicising young children. For some, politics and young children may seem an incongruous combination. But young children's lives are immersed in the political as they begin to know and define themselves in relation to gender, race, class, popularity and so on. There are multiple entry points for teachers to begin to explore with children the politics of their everyday lives. We need to recognise that if we remain silent on such matters, then we endorse the inequitable power relations that emerge amongst children. The process of politicising children will be achieved invisibly, in silence, by default. Young girls and boys need the skills to make non-sense out of the restrictive ways in which they are regulated according to gender.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest education reform should begin in the early years. Young children need to develop the skills to shape their own realities, to bite back at the otherwise restrictive social realities of gender politics.

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